

Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team Platoon:  
Infantry Squad Leaders Only

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"Failure in preparation leads to disaster on the battlefield," according to MCDP 1, yet the U. S. Marine Corps routinely sets up its security force guards for failure. Marine Corps Order P1326.6D W/CH 1, "Selecting, Screening, and Preparing Enlisted Marines for Special Duty Assignments and Independent Duties" states that NCOs "are selected from a wide range of [military occupational specialty's] MOS's." <sup>1</sup> While serving in Marine Corps Security Force (MCSF) Regiment as a platoon commander and operations officer for the Fleet Anti-Terrorism Security Team (FAST) Company Europe and 2<sup>nd</sup> FAST Company, the author had squad leaders who were not infantrymen by trade. Marines selected are responsible for carrying out security missions and leading 13 to 15 infantrymen, yet ninety percent of the non-infantry non-commissioned officers (NCOs) the author received had never led in this capacity before or had never served in an infantry-based unit. Receiving inexperienced personnel created an additional training burden. Consequently, the Marine Corps should staff its FAST platoon squad leader billets with only infantry NCOs in order to accomplish mission objectives, to prevent micro-management, and normalize NCO career progression.

### **Current Staffing Practice**

Following their first enlistment, existing staffing procedures offer non-infantry NCOs the option to serve as a Marine Corps security force guard (MOS 8152). They must attend Basic Security Guard (BSG) School operated by Training Company, Marine Corps Security Force Regiment, in Chesapeake, Virginia. Upon graduating BSG, the NCOs are sent to a FAST Company to fulfill a tour in their "B" billet assignment. BSG is also a follow-on school for those infantry Marines pursuing the MCSF option. However, because BSG focuses on the sentry, covering basic physical security skill sets, training received there is not adequate to prepare non-infantry NCOs for a demanding "B" billet such as FAST. Instead, the burden shifts to the FAST platoon leadership to provide the necessary training.

### **Mission Accomplishment**

SECNAV Instruction 5530.4D states that U.S. Marine Corps forces tasked to conduct security missions provide capabilities of antiterrorism and physical security beyond that of the normal Navy security force (NSF). The capabilities required of U.S. Marine Corps forces to conduct such a security mission are the following:

- Provide a final barrier/element of an integrated security plan or form a tight perimeter around the asset being protected.
- Provide a response force, trained to operate as a tactical team, to protect designated naval or national assets.
- Deadly force must be authorized specifically to preclude damage to, or compromise/loss of those naval assets deemed vital to national security...
- Provide security for designated advanced naval bases or critical naval assets as determined.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the SECNAV Instruction 5530.4D defines the following:

- Armed Marine: "A Marine, equipped with a firearm per applicable Marine Corps directives, trained to function as a team member in a combat environment and able to employ the skills of fire, maneuver, and communications, as needed, to provide security for designated Navy assets and those vital to national security."
- Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team: "An antiterrorism team composed of armed Marines task organized and equipped to perform specified security missions in support of naval installations, ships, aircraft, or personnel."
- Marine Corps Security Element (MCSE). "An element composed of armed Marines task-organized and equipped to perform validated security missions where deadly force is authorized in support of naval installations, activities, and aircraft."<sup>3</sup>

Hence, missions range from U.S. embassy reinforcement to a shipboard security mission. For example, FAST Company, Europe has supported shipboard security missions, embassy reinforcements, multiple random antiterrorism measures aboard naval installations, and quick reaction force missions.

### **Micro-management**

These missions require squad leaders to be able to possess troop leading skills, be technically and tactically proficient in basic infantry skills, and ability to operate independently of the platoon leadership. Unfortunately, not enough time is typically allocated within the platoon's scheduled cycle to prepare these NCOs fully. The second order effects begin to appear as the platoon leadership begins to micro-manage when subordinate leaders display that they do not have the requisite skill sets to accomplish their assigned duties. Such intervention erodes confidence and morale; ultimately, the Marines these NCOs have been entrusted to lead suffer. To avoid these effects, the Marine Corps must set these NCOs up for success and not for failure. In a conventional infantry platoon, the platoon commander or the platoon sergeant will

accompany a squad even if the squad leader has been deemed the patrol leader. Added responsibility is given to squad leaders serving in a FAST platoon.

Unfortunately, the lack of experience in an infantry based unit, added to an unfamiliar environment and an unfamiliar MOS increases friction for these NCOs in an already fluid and ever-changing operating environment. Major John K. Kelley, former FAST platoon commander, stated that "the significant deficiencies that non-infantry squad leaders displayed were troop leading skills, proficiency in basic infantry skills, and executing live-fire ranges."<sup>4</sup> This remains true today, and is at the heart of the problem. An effective screening process is not in place, which contributes to a lack of qualified individuals for this demanding "B" billet.

Captain Adolf Von Schell captured lessons learned from his experience fighting in the German Army against the Russians during the winter of 1915 and writes, "If we give these inexperienced troops a backbone of experienced soldiers and experienced commanders their efficiency will be tremendously increased and they will be spared heavy losses."<sup>5</sup>

This passage captures precisely the importance of having experienced, qualified infantry NCOs to lead inexperienced infantrymen, in an infantry-based unit.

### **Career Progression**

The current practice of staffing squad leader billets with non-infantry NCOs whose preparation and selection process is inadequate contributes to poor performance and a performance rating dilemma for the platoon commander. The platoon commander's responsibility is to evaluate the squad leader's performance. He cannot help but ask himself the following pointed questions: Does one consider that this sergeant is not an infantryman by trade? Does poor performance result from lack of experience? Does one look at the entire system and say it has failed in preparing this sergeant for this special duty assignment? Did the platoon commander do everything he could to set this sergeant up for success? The evaluation becomes unfair, as the commander looks at all the facts. These evaluations can adversely impact NCO career progression, yet taking care of these NCOs needs to be priority.

## **Solutions**

The first recommended solution is to adjust the current curriculum and ensure it has an NCO focus. Captain Francisco Zavala, former officer-in-charge of BSG, stated that this was not a new idea and estimated that it would add two weeks to the current four-week BSG course.<sup>6</sup> This is not realistic as each BSG class is filled with a few NCOs and would not be cost effective in the long run. Captain Stephen M. Ray, current officer-in-charge of BSG, stated that potential non-infantry squad leaders are "administratively qualified, but many lack basic troop leading and infantry skills." He recommends that all NCOs assigned to security forces should be required to attend Infantry Squad Leaders Course in order to gain a foundation on troop leading skills and basic infantry skills.<sup>7</sup> Master Gunnery Sergeant Luis A. Perez, MCSF Regiment Operations Chief, stated that "...my goal since arriving to the command is to place some 03 [infantry] squad leader mix with non-03 MOS [squad leaders] to the companies."<sup>8</sup> A short term solution is to properly screen non-infantry NCOs before assigning the MCSF "B" billet option. The long term plan should focus on a revised screening process and a deliberate phasing "in" of infantry NCOs into FAST platoon squad leader billets.

Initially, the FAST platoons will benefit from having experienced infantry squad leaders in their ranks. Ultimately, the operating forces will reap the benefits of having first-term Marines prepared to join the fight, because they were led by experienced infantry NCOs. The operating forces continue to have shortages of NCOs to lead squads; thus, their experience will be valuable.

### **Counterarguments**

Opponents will contend that in today's operating forces, the Marine Corps' mantra "every Marine a rifleman" is as true today as it has been throughout history. Throughout the Marine Corps, units will benefit from having non-infantry NCOs who served in a FAST platoon, because they have gained leadership techniques and weapons and tactical proficiency. In addition, a Marine having a successful tour will enhance the Marine's chances for promotion and show the board that the Marine has excelled outside of his MOS.

Unfortunately, in order to gain this experience, the platoon would run its life cycle attempting to close the gap between an "inexperienced non-infantry leader" and an "experienced infantry leader."

Meanwhile, the experience gap will continue to put Marines at risk during mission execution and to weaken morale of the FAST unit. Time, money, and manpower are an issue to implement a quick fix.

### **Conclusion**

In the future, the Marine Corps will continue to find itself conducting military operations other than war and will need to continue to rely on the expeditionary nature of a FAST platoon. Care to assign the right person for the right job must be taken when assigning NCOs to fill FAST platoon squad leader billets. "Since war is at base a human enterprise, effective personnel management is important to success. This is especially true for a doctrine of maneuver warfare, which places a premium on individual judgment and action. We should recognize that all Marines of a given grade and occupational specialty are not interchangeable and should assign people to billets based on specific ability and temperament."<sup>9</sup>

**1590 words**

## Notes

1. Marine Corps Order P1326.6D W/CH 1, Selecting, Screening, and Preparing Enlisted Marines for Special Duty Assignments and Independent Duties, 12 September 1999, Change 1 - dated 13 March 2001: Chapter 5, Marine Corps Security Forces Duty, 5-3.

2. Secretary of the Navy Instruction 5530.4D, Naval Security Force Employment and Operations, 3 October 2006: Enclosure 2, Employment Guidelines for U.S. Marine Corps Forces in support of Naval Security Missions.

3. Secretary of the Navy Instruction 5530.4D, Naval Security Force Employment and Operations, 3 October 2006: Enclosure 1, Definitions.

4. Major John K. Kelley. Faculty Advisor, Expeditionary Warfare School. Served in 1<sup>st</sup> Fleet Anti-terrorism Security Team Company from 1998 to 2001. Interview, 18 December 2008.

5. Adolf Von Schell. Battle Leadership. Quantico: The Marine Corps Association, reprint (2004), 46.

6. Captain Francisco Zavala. Officer-in-Charge of Basic Security Guard School, Training Company, MCSF Regiment from Oct 06-Mar 07. Phone interview, 5 December 2008.

7. Captain Stephen M. Ray. Current Officer-in-charge of Basic Security Guard School, Training Company, MCSF Regiment. Phone interview by the author, 9 January 2009.

8. Master Gunnery Sergeant Luis A. Perez. Marine Corps Security Force Regiment, Operations Chief. E-mail, 5 December 2008.

9. MCDP 1. Warfighting. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1997, 64.

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